La politique indigène in the history of Bangui

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Peaceful beginnings

No other outpost of European colonization in central Africa seems to have had such a troubled history as that of Bangui, founded by the French in June 1889. Its first ten or fifteen years, as reported by the whites who lived them, were dangerous and uncertain, if not desperate, ones. For a time there was even talk of abandoning the post or founding a more important one a little further up the Ubangi River. The main problem was that of relations with the local people. The purpose of the present study is to describe this turbulent period in Bangui's history and attempt to explain it. Why was it different from that, for example, of Leopoldville, Brazzaville, and Bangala (later to be called Nouvelle Anvers, and now Mankanza)? This is the question we address ourselves to.¹ [My task concerns itself with what was called the politique indigène, a frequently occurring rubric under which reports were made by administrators concerning relations with the indigenous people of the Haut-Oubangui. If this study appears to be biased in favor of the French point of view, it is not by intention. That is, I do not want to pretend that the only history of Bangui, or that of any other part of Africa, worthy of consideration is one that deals with the European experience. Indeed, I deplore such a point of view. Colonization was an experience that untold numbers of Africans were immediately or very soon touched by and suffered under. This is one of the themes of my The black man's burden (in press), whose title is meant to evoke what colonization meant for Africans in the 1880s and 1890s in central Africa. Nonetheless, it is excusable to take one perspective as a first step in a historical task. Even though Bangui's history was not entirely white, but Ubangian as well, we accomplish much by understanding how the whites saw it,

impatiently awaiting the day when a Centralafrican one will be written. But it must be a history, a reasoned argument based on carefully sifted fact. Fiction, not without its own role, cannot be allowed to replace nor be confused with history. I make no attempt at a general history of the post, nor do I integrate, except in a small way, the history of Zongo, a post of the Congo Free State just across the river and founded around the same time. Chronological details regarding the foundation of Bangui are to be found in Cantournet (1986).]

The selection of the site for the post that Albert Dolisie named Bangui was undoubtedly a rational one. This place was not, to begin with, at far remove from the last post at Modzaka; it was crucial in those years to be able to communicate from one post to another reasonably well by canoe as well as by steamer.² [By one account it took nine days to go from Modzaka to the rapids and five days to return downstream (Veistroffer 1931:154). However, the French had deserted Modzaka by 1896 (Anonymous 1896:224; Bobichon 1899:11).] But an equally important, if not more important, factor was the presence of rapids. In dry season they would have prevented or made very difficult the use of a steamboat. Geography, then, played a critical role in the selection of the site, just as it did in deterring both George Grenfell, the English Baptist missionary, and Alphonse Vangele, the Congo Free State officer, in their explorations of the Ubangi basin.

Other factors that figured in the selection of colonial outposts seem to have played a less important role in Bangui's choice: for example, a large population whose labor would contribute to colonization, a hospitable reception on the part of the local people, and the availability of food. Their

absence boded ill for the future of the establishment of French authority in this region.³ [That population was probably not a factor is seen in the fact that A. Dolisie reported only "trois petits villages" in the area (ANSOM GE IV.D14a), and Musy wrote on 20 September 1889 that "il y a peu de villages autour de nous" (quoted in Kalck 1970a(2):351). Contradictory data from others do not, in my opinion, weaken my case, because I am focussing on what the founders of Bangui saw. They may have missed much, strange though that may seem to us now. For example, Alis reported a dense population around Bangui (1891:105), and Baratier a great number of people upriver of Zinga, in other words between Bangui and this site (Baratier [1897]:20). Further downriver, presumably on the left bank, Vangele reported "Les pays des Ba-Atis, des Monzembo et Mon-Toumbi présentent une succession non interrompue de villages" (MT, EMs III, p. 2). Except for Alis' statement, which is puzzling without a critical assessment, it would still appear accurate to say that the immediate area around the new post was not visibly populated to any extent. I would guess that within a perimeter of ten kilometers the population was no more than about 10,000. In 1906, that is, after a lot more was known of the area, the population of the Région de Bangui, which probably extended as far downriver as the Lobaye River and at least ten or twenty kilometers upriver, was said to be approximately 30,000 (1907, ANX 4(3)D13; cf. ANX 4(3)D15). The matter of food is discussed below.]

We make this historical judgement in hindsight. For Dolisie, and for Vangele, who founded Zongo, there may have been reasonable grounds for hope in planting themselves here at the Ubangi's turn eastward. If large plantations were not visible to them and if the people did not welcome them with open arms, the first contact was nonetheless more pacific than it was inimical. If this fact can be established, then subsequent events take on a special significance. Explaining what happened later cannot, in any case, ignore how things began. There was a discontinuity in race relations, but all that whites saw was an unchanging and implacable hostility towards themselves.

The first white to arrive at the rapids was Grenfell. This was sometime in February of 1885. The local people were apparently frightened by this apparent invasion by strangers on a noisy, smoke-bellowing vessel, the likes of which they had never

seen before. It was attacked by fifty canoes, whose passengers threw at it spears, arrows, sticks, and stones, apparently seeking to drive it off more than take lives. In any case, Grenfell was able to land somewhere nearby and make friends with the people (Johnston 1908(1):132). This must have been an impressive landing but a very peaceful one, for Grenfell was in the habit of taking along with him on his exploratory expeditions persons who would demonstrate that his intentions were peaceful, not warlike: African children, and on some occasions even his wife and infant child (MH 1885:293; 1886:110).⁴ [However, we do not know exactly who made up the crew on the 'Peace' at this particular time.] Somewhere downriver of the rapids on this same trip, presumably among people who were going to get such a terrible reputation later on, people, in fact, who had given the impression of being suspicious and warlike on his earlier trips, Grenfell was well received and the people asked him to stop and build (Johnston 1908(1):133).⁵ [Characterizations like 'suspicious,' 'warlike,' 'friendly,' and so forth make up part of the way Europeans responded to Africans. That the way Europeans were received was determined in part by the way they appeared amongst the Africans should need no argument. Whites were not simply 'discovering' Africans as they were, regardless of what they may have believed. They were 'creating' a people by how they saw them and how they behaved amongst them. Although this is not a principal theme of this study, it is clear from the exposition. Elsewhere, dealing with this same area (Samarin 1984a), it is the main thesis.]

The next explorer apparently had an equally good if not better reception than Grenfell did. This was Vangele, who arrived at the rapids in October 1886 and then again in November 1887, when he claimed the territory around Zongo for the Congo Free State. Of the inhabitants he had nothing but good to say: "Les riverains sont paisibles et accueillants C'est le meilleur peuple que j'aie jamais rencontré" (Cuyppers 1960:44).⁶ [It is surprising therefore to read what Kalck has to say about Vangele's arrival in 1886: "En raison de la forte crue de l'Oubangui, il ne put ni trouver de passage, ni même contourner la rive boisée, occupée par des populations Bouaka hostiles" "[Vangele's expedition] fut très mal reçue par les riverains, Bobangui, Mondjembo et Bouaka" (Kalck 1970a(2):341). As so often

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happens in Kalck's history of the Central African Republic, one finds here no reference to substantiate this statement.]

In the nearby area of what came to be called Bangui itself relations with the residents began auspiciously. Five treaties were made on the Ubangi and three on the Mpoko in October 1888.⁷ [The establishment of the post is described by Kalck (1970a(2):348) in these words: "Après la cérémonie de l'échange des sangs avec le chef m'baka propriétaire du lieu, il était indiqué que l'on avait procédé à l'enterrement de la guerre, symbolisée par une cartouche de fusil et un fer de sagaie." This chief is elsewhere identified as Bimbo (Kalck 1970b:66), whose name persisted as a village name through the nineteenth century, and exists indeed today. In 1901 the village was located near the mouth of the Mpoko River (Pauwel, ANX 4(3)D8). But in a letter written by Albert Dolisie, 23 July 1889, it is clear that although the ceremony took place at the "nouveau poste," the chief came from upriver of the rapids (Cantournet 1986:352). Kalck has apparently misrepresented the facts. As for treaties, he also mentions that Musy had exchanged blood with the chief of the village M'Goubé, about forty kilometers in the interior in October 1889, who had brought him "quelques vivres" (1970a(2):351). No reference is cited. Jean Dybowski, on an expedition to the hinterland north of the Ubangi River, exchanged blood among Bondjo downriver of Bangui in 1891. However, he said that he did not really believe that whites got any benefit from these rites, which did not hold the natives to their promises (Dybowski 1893:164)] These treaties, of course, did not automatically guarantee good relations with everybody in the neighboring region, but they might have served as the basis for a stable amicable relationship with at least some of the people. That would have been something to begin with. It turned out not to be the case.

At any rate, it is explicitly stated in October 1889 that relations with the population on the right bank were excellent (AL..., ANX 4(3)D1).

What went wrong? Was there, indeed, justification for all that whites had to say in subsequent years? That is, were the local people — and some from the very villages where treaties had been made — as bad as they were made out to be?⁸ [I realize, of course, that treaties were made more to establish 'legal' claim to land in competition with other European powers and that due to problems of communication the whites' intentions were far from clear to the local people. It is nonetheless difficult to consider

these transactions as being entirely worthless. If they did not constitute binding agreements for the Ubangians, there must have been something in them that symbolized good will on the part of both parties.]

Bad behavior

In attempting a description of the relations between whites and Ubangians around Bangui one must determine what the natives did to alarm those at the post, what the whites did in response to these actions, and what whites believed about the local people. The last is important, because beliefs were not only the product of white contacts with the people but also a determinant of how they were treated. In this section we examine the record of what the people around Bangui are supposed to have been guilty of.⁹ [This is a survey of all the data at my disposal. Although my research covers a wide variety of sources, it unfortunately did not include the reading of the journal of the post.]

Remarkable for their absence from all accounts are attacks upon the post.¹⁰ [I am using the word attack in a somewhat military sense. The word 'attaquer' is in fact used by whites of this period. For example, what was referred to as an "attaque du poste" is actually described as four Bondjo attempting to demolish the administrator's house during the night while "un groupe plus fort se tenait dans les environs" (Leclercq [?], 11.8.1895, CSE). In my opinion, this was burglary. We must therefore be careful to distinguish substance from rhetoric, a topic that is discussed below. We will note, nonetheless, that Fr. Rémy wrote, possibly of the year 1892, that the Buzeru were "en guerre avec la station française" (Rémy, CSE, No. 5, p. 20). Kalck asserts, without documentation, that Uzac (no date specified) "dut repousser plusieurs de leurs [i.e. Bouzerous] attaques" (Kalck 1970a(2):351). And Castellani reports, after a trip to the country in 1896-1897, that Félix Tulle, who had been chef de poste at Bangui, had had twenty combats with Bondjo during seven months (Castellani 1898:234).] The local inhabitants did not attempt a concerted effort to drive away the foreign residents of their land.¹¹ [The so-called Zalanga, for example, might have been able to launch an attack. The people of this village were considered "puissants," "respectés et craints" by the riverine people, and had more than 1,500 "lances" (that is, armed men) (Breton, ANSOM GC IV.14a). However, Kalck asserts, without argumentation, that "les Bouaka-Bondjo devaient tenter, à de multiples reprises d'enlever les

postes de Bangui et de Zongo (1889-1890)" (1970a(2):374).] They would, of course, have been at a great disadvantage, armed as they were with only traditional weapons. An alternative could have been persistent ambushing of soldiers and workers who for one reason or another found themselves away from the post. During this period, for example, armed personnel were busy at obtaining things that whites needed (for which see below). What we are trying to establish is the difference between the record of murder, for example, and the fear of it. In 1891 whites certainly believed that the Buzeru had become "chaque jour plus menaçants" and one always ran the risk of being speared on going any distance from the post (Nebout 1892:224). Possibly of the year 1897 it was written that "le poste toutes les nuits était assiégé par les indigènes" (Bobichon 1937:64).

The list of violent deeds is a small one, as the following chronological survey reveals. At Bangui in October 1890 a Bobangi, having come to trade in ivory, was killed 150 m. outside the post's palisade (Kalck 1970a(2):388; 1970b:74).¹² [12Kalck does not cite his sources. Nebout's report (1892:224) seems to be of the same event. He says that the murder took place 50 m. from the post and that the body was dismembered, of which only a "morceau d'intestin" was found.] At this same time a small post of the Congo Free State on an island near the rapids had been assailed — as Kalck puts it — again (Kalck 1970b:74). On a night in August 1895 at the State's post at Zongo a soldier overseeing the burning of bricks had fallen asleep (it is categorically stated), when he was killed, disembowelled, and had his two arms cut off. And in October a Sénégalais is killed by a spear a few steps from the post's garden for which he was responsible (No name, 9.10.1895, CSE).¹³ [13The event is noted under the heading "Bondjos."] This year is described by Fr. Goblet whose arrival at the mission is described in these words:

[We arrive] escortés par deux Sénégalais, cartouche au fusil. C'est que le pays, où nous arrivons, est en guerre avec le poste du gouvernement et par là même avec tous les blancs.

Aussi ne peut-on pas sortir seuls et sans fusil, même à 1/4 d'heure de la mission. Nos Noirs, travailleurs de la Mission, ne vont pas non plus au travail sans le fusil-gras. Nous-mêmes nous devons toujours être armés. Même à la maison nous devons continuellement être sur nos gardes. C'est ainsi que chaque nuit, deux Sénégalais font une garde vigilante autour de nos logis" (Goblet, Pâques 1895, CSE, p. 135).

What follows is surely a record of violence in 1897, the kind that whites came to expect of the locals:

Dimanche dernier, vers 10 hrs du matin, alors que les enfants étaient rassemblés avec moi, à la chapelle, pour être exercés à différents mouvements, voilà que tout à coup on entend l'enfant-cuisinier s'écrier les Bondjos! Il venait d'en voir un, armé d'une sagaie courrir après un enfant de 6 à 7 ans. Nous accourons tous vers le lieu indiqué et à quelques pas de la basse-cour, dans le chemin du cimetière je rencontre un enfant étendu, blessé d'un large et profond coup de sagaie dans le dos (Sallaz, 1.6.1897, CSE).¹⁴ [14Illustrative of the way whites wrote their histories of the period is the report by another missionary that not only was this child speared but was carried away, presumably to be eaten, by a Bondjo (Moreau [1911]:170).]

That was an eye-witness account that has to be taken seriously. Reports of cannibalism, in my opinion, have to be treated, however, with great caution: for example, that the Buzeru had eaten two natives from the post (Rémy, No. 5, p. 27). We can at least deduce that two were killed — no matter whatever else happened to them.¹⁵ [15The subject of cannibalism as colonial propaganda is taken up in Samarin (in press). See also below.] The greatest number is twenty-one, men who had, according to one administrator, writing in his memoirs, been assassinated and eaten by the "féroces Bondjos" (Bobichon 1937:64).¹⁶ [16These may be the same as the twenty-two militiamen and canoers mentioned by Mgr. Augouard (8.7.1897, CSE).]

Included in any listing by whites of murderous acts by the Bondjo would have been the deaths of Musy and Comte, who were killed in military expeditions, as well as the deaths of Fr. (or Friar) Séverin and of the lad who was accompanying him. Fr. Gourdy was also wounded as he went from St. Paul to Ste. Famille further upriver (Augouard, 1.7.1898, CSE).¹⁷ [170f Comte's death, which took place in a deliberate and premeditated attack on the Bondjo on the Mpoko River, Georges Bruel, then at Mobaye, wrote this to Dr. Sambuc, the grieving survivor at Bangui: "[Comte] qui est tombé au champ d'honneur, victime de son dévouement à la cause coloniale. C'est un nom de plus à ajouter à la liste de la longue de ceux qui sont morts pour faire de la France une grande puissance Africaine. Comte a contribué pour sa part à l'extension de notre empire ..." (Bruel, Mobaye, 25.7.1897, ASOM B33-41).]

As late as 1901 there is a report of seventeen blacks having been killed by Bondjo at a trading post in the Haut-Oubangui, although the location is not specified (Augouard, 6.8.1901, CSE).

One might consider arson an act of violence. The whites certainly did. In 1893 the Bondjo are supposed to have set fire to some storehouses (Comte, ASOM B23-25). Three years later the administrator fears so much that the Bondjo might set fire to the storehouses that he passes half the nights on guard (Comte, ASOM B23-35).¹⁸ [18He had been told that the Bondjo wanted to avenge the death of N'Saou (Comte, ASOM B23-25). I unfortunately have no information about this event. I would, however, assume that he was a notable person who had been killed by the French.]

No, it was not violence that the people were so much guilty of as it was theft. Even the reported cases of fire were apparently committed to obtain goods from the whites. It is of theft that we have the greatest information. Several incidents are reported for the year 1892 (Largeau, ANSOM-Mi 213). Visiting Bangui in 1893 to select the site for a mission, Mgr. Augouard wrote on 9 February: "La situation est très tendue avec les deux villages voisins du Poste à droite et à gauche, à cause des nombreux vols commis par les féroces indigènes, qui pillent avec une audace incroyable. Plusieurs fusils ont été volés, soit au Poste, soit à la résidence"

(De Witte 1924:233). Again, "Dans la nuit du 5 au 6 octobre [1893], les Bouzerou pénétraient dans le magasin d'armes, tuaient 2 miliciens et volaient plusieurs fusils" (Kalck 1970a(2):503, no reference cited). The situation two years later is described as follows:

Aucune pirogue ne pourrait être alors conservée dans le poste sans être aussitôt volée. Nuit et jour les cases devaient être gardées afin que les villageois des environs ne puissent venir les incendier. Les vols et les incidents divers étaient à peu près quotidiens et leurs mentions remplissaient alors les pages du journal du poste" (Kalck 1970a(2):510).

What is clear from these reports is that stealing was done at night. This happened again in November 1896 (Comte, ASOM B23-31) and January 1897 (Comte, ASOM B23-35). So fearful of these nightly visits were the two white residents that for forty nights in May and June they stood guard by turns all night long (Comte, ASOM B23-38). And there were nightly visits in July (Jacquot, ASOM B31-22).

It is a significant fact that there is not a single instance of an attack on a canoe laden with goods, although villagers took advantage of capsized canoes to loot when they could. The people must have been afraid. De Kerraoul, who had such denigrating things to say of them, observed that "ils sont aussi lâches qu'ils sont féroces et s'enfuient sans résistance dès qu'ils aperçoivent un fusil!" (De Kerraoul, December 1893, ANX 4(3)D3). It was apparently more prudent for the people to see what they could get by stealth.

Stealing was, therefore, a real problem. We will come back to this topic below when we consider its impact on the whites. For the moment we can assume that the local people tried to get anything they could put their hands on. There was a lot in the storehouses that was of value to them. Guns were, of course, of particular interest.¹⁹ [19Bruel wrote in

1896 that at Bangui there were three postes de garde at night because the Bondjo "sont grands voleurs de fusils surtout" (Bruehl, ASOM B1-49).] This was an area, from all that we know, where guns were a novelty.²⁰ [20The chef de poste in 1889 wrote: "Heureusement que ces indigènes n'ont pas encore de fusils comme les Boubanguis" (Musy 1891:293). However, muskets were soon being introduced by whites in trade with Ubangians (Sallaz, 8.10.1897, CSE). As early as 1892 it was said of Bembe, the Gbanziri chief upriver of Bangui, and a good friend of the French: "Fier de ses armes à feu, Bémbe est parti en guerre contre les N'deris" (Largeau, ANX 4(3)D2).] Moreover, stealing went on even after the post was well established. This is what a visitor reported in 1901: "Le vol chez eux [Bondjo] n'est pas un vice, c'est leur nature même. ... Ceux-ci [vols] sont quotidiens, et accomplis avec une adresse vraiment admirable" (Cruchet, ANX 4(3)D8). Even the rifle of Henri Bobichon was stolen in 1896 (Jacquot, ASOM B31-27).

We conclude from this survey that there was reason for the French at Bangui to be constantly on guard. The first contact whites had with the local people may have been encouraging, but residence in the country proved to be far from peaceful.

Who were these people that were making such a nuisance of themselves?

The people at Bangui

The people who were making life so difficult for the post of Bangui had to be identified by the whites. It was not enough to call them, as they of course frequently did, "the natives" or "the villagers." One's enemies had to have a name. What this was did not emerge quickly and unambiguously. In fact, there was a lot of variation in what the people were called.²¹ [21Musy, about whom we have already heard, confessed that the names of the people around Bangui were not known (Musy 1890:293).]

The name most frequently associated with Bangui was M'Bouzerous (Veistroffer 1933:35), or Bouzerous (Alis 1891:105; Dybowski 1893:18, 176; Remy, No. 5, p. 21; Prioul 1981:34), with other orthographic renditions.²² [22In one document it appears that Bozerou is simply the name of an agglomeration of three nearby villages (Breton, 7.7.1890, ANSOM GC

IV.014a).] They were also distributed over a greater distance: e.g. "ils ont des villages en amont et en aval, à une distance de quelques minutes de pirogue seulement de chez nous [Mission St. Paul des Rapides] (Mgr. Augouard, letter of 25.12.1894 in Annales Apostoliques 1895(37):20). And there were supposed to have been villages on the Mpoko River (Bruehl, ASOM B2-34). But more often than not, all these people were called Bondjo, since the Buzeru were considered to be part of the Bondjo race (Bruehl, 22.6.1896, ASOM B1-49; Maistre 1895:25).²³ [23It was this belief that must have led Nebout (1982:227) to locate the Buzeru as starting around 3°30' N and ending about 4°50' N. When Nebout said that "Leur peau a la couleur du café peu grillé, certains même sont jaunâtre ... (1892:228), he must have been describing a Bantu-speaking group at some distance downriver from Bangui and not the people around the post. I have seen many Isungu (or Mbati) from Mbaiki (but probably originally from the Bantu zone of the Ubangi basin), for example, who might be described in this way. Because most writers use the name for those around Bangui, we must conclude that Nebout included other groups incorrectly. This kind of error was common in the nineteenth century. We will see this in connection with the term Bondjo.] On the other hand, others saw these two as different ethnic groups (Brunache 1894:134; Goblet, CSE, No. 3, p. 137).

Unlike the name Buzeru the designation of Bondjo owes nothing onomastically to a place or ethnic name around Bangui. It has been argued already (Samarin 1984a) that the name started as a place name on the Lower Ubangi and was applied to groups further and further up the river until those at Bangui served almost as the prototype of the so-called race.²⁴ [24Several people have recently asserted in all seriousness that the name derives from French Bonjour. This etymology probably goes back to the speculation of Fr. Rémy: "Voulaient-ils dire 'Bonjour,' que les Européens disaient en arrivant, peut-être ..." (De Banville 1895:89, citing J. Rémy, Vie de Mgr. Augouard, p. 109). Apart from Samarin (1984a), this suggestion (how the phonological form sociolinguistic grounds. I find whites greeted central African have used some African greeting malamu, introduced by the Zanz name Bondjo covered ethnolinguistic group

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erroneous. Its use, according to the aforementioned argument, is that the ethnic group (or 'race' in French terms) was created as a racist stereotype by the French.²⁵ [25]An example of the broad use of the term is the following, referring to people found midway between Lirranga and Bangui: "Le pays, principalement les rives sont occupés par les Bondjos qui toujours ont été turbulents et hostiles aux Européens" (De Pauwel, 1.4.1901, ANX 4(3)08).]

From our current understanding of the ethnolinguistic groups of the area and in the light of statements made in the nineteenth century it seems safe to identify the people around Bangui as Ngbaka.²⁶ [26]Kaleck does this categorically, not providing any evidence, inconsistently writing the name (M'Baka, M'Gbaka, Bouaka), and not distinguishing between two kinds of Ngbaka, for which see below: 1970a(1):257; 1970a(2):341, 348, 351, 376, 388, 511.] The name appears as early as 1891, when E. Ponel wrote that the French were in a state of hostility with the Bwakas, neighbors of Mokouangué (Ponel, ANX 4(3)D1). These would have been the people identified in a document of 1897: "les Bondjos (Buakas pour la plupart) [between the mouth of the Mpoko River and the Elephant rapids]" (Jacquot, ASOM B31-27). The following year the Duc d'Uzès identified the people at Nkoumbi, downriver of Bangui, as Mbouaka (D'Uzès 1894:153). And in 1899 Gentil refers to repressive action taken by the expedition of Jean-Marie Ferdinand de Béhagle against the Gbagga (Gentil, February 1899, ANX 2D11). And by 1909 the Baka are definitely considered a branch of the Bondjo race (Martin, Leboeuf, and Roubaud 1909:176; cf. Challaye 1909:73).

Because of the distribution of an ethnic group today identified by scholars as Ngbaka-Ma'bo, extensively studied by Jacqueline Thomas (e.g., 1964), it would appear that the people around Bangui were of this ethnicity. Another ethnolinguistic group also goes by the name Ngbaka, but its language belongs to the large Gbaya family. The people and language are distinguished from the other Ngbaka as Ngbaka-Gbaya or Ngbaka-Mandja.²⁷ [27]For a linguistic classification see Samarin 1971. In Zaire today people called Ngbaga, presumably Ngbaka-Ma'bo, are located along the left bank of the Ubangi,

starting from Zongo. The Ngwaka, whose language is related to Mandja, are found inland, separated from the river by Banda-speaking people, north of Gemena (Institut Géographique du Zaïre 1972). However, in 1891 Bwaka were located on the left bank as far away as Mokouangué (Ponel, 11.2.1891, ANX 4(3)D1). In 1887 the distance from Zongo to Mokouangué was estimated as twenty miles (Janssens and Cateaux 1908:172).] The present identification is, however, tentative; we await an ethnohistorical study of the area. That the Ngbaka might have belonged to the Gbaya group instead of the Ngbaka-Ma'bo one is suggested by the fact that Bakas-Mandja, as they were described, were located in the hinterland between the Yambere and Mpoko rivers, although the source for this information does not indicate how close they were to Bangui (1908, ANX 4(3)D14). Moreover, when Ponel was in Gbaya territory far to the west, he wrote this: "Nous sommes ici dans l'Oubangui, même type de population mêmes armes, langage des N'Drys des rapides (Biri N'Goma, M'Bafi)" (Ponel, 29.5.1892, ANSOM GC III.13). Ponel is cited by Gentil later that year as saying that at a certain point the Pandés cease and the N'Drys begin, going eastward, and "offrant la plus parfaite similitude avec les N'Drys de l'Oubangui" (Gentil, 1892, ANSOM GCIII.13). Although the identification with the Ndri is wrong, this being a Banda-speaking population, we are struck by Ponel's relating a Gbaya population with one near Bangui. Furthermore, if Ngere can be identified with N'jieré (my spelling possibly a misreading of handwritten material), we would have an even stronger argument. The reason is that there was a Ngere village behind Bangui (Decorse 1906:13), and the "N'jieré parle le mandjia ... qui [la langue] ressemble tout à fait au langage de la Sanga ..." (Gentil 26.5.1896, ANX 2D11).

We will now consider how the French perceived the Ngbaka — that is, the Buzeru and Bondjo.

The whites' perception

The French had a low opinion of the people around Bangui in marked contrast to their estimation of those who were found

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further upriver. The least that was said of them was that "ces Bondjos, de naturel paresseux, ne possèdent rien ou presque rien" (De Pauwel, ANX 4(3)D8). And "laissez loin du poste se trouvent quelques pauvres villages habités par de misérables Noirs de race inférieure dont il n'y a rien à attendre" (Largeau, ANX 4(3)D2). Even their physical features could be held against them. The people of Yakuli, for example, were held to be inferior just because of the shape of their skull (Gaillard, ANSOM GC III.13e).

They were, of course, generally considered savage by nature and hostile to whites. Perhaps it was because of their constant thieving that one white wrote that the river population were "généralement composée d'anciens esclaves de l'intérieur devenus bandits" (Breton, ANSOM GC IV.D14a).²⁸ [28] In this same document Breton considers the people of Bagassi and Bobassa (i.e. "ces derniers") — in a list with Bozerou and Vacouli — as the slaves of Zalanga. It is not likely that they were even in a client relationship with those in the interior; it was usually the other way round in this area. Yet some kind of sociocultural relationship must have been observed.]

It would appear that the reputation of the Bondjo at Bangui was established early and that it was spoken of at Brazzaville, where whites heard of it before going to the Haut-Oubangui. Long before going up to Bangui Mgr. Augouard had this to say: "C'est à Zongo (à St. Paul des Rapides) qu'il faut songer à s'installer pour tâcher de faire disparaître les horreurs qui se commettent chaque jour sur les rives du grand fleuve" (Augouard, 28.8.1889, CSE). This is what another wrote of the year 1890:

Jusque-là [regarding an incident of presumed killing and eating of three fugitives by people near Bangui], nous étions restés sceptiques au sujet des histoires terrifiantes, que, dans la colonie, on nous racontait sur les riverains du haut Oubangui: de hideuses brutes, toujours altérés de sang, ne se nourrissant que de chair humaine, d'une bravoure, d'une férocité indomptables" (Nebout 1892:223).

An administrator at Bangui described as

being "les êtres les plus dégradés de la création ...," people who "mangent les cadavres" (De Kerraoul, December 1893, ANX 4(3)D3). It was in talking with him that Mgr. Augouard learned that the Bondjo were "au dernier degré de l'échelle humaine; ce sont les hyènes de l'humanité" (Augouard, 11.1.1894, CSE). Doctor Briand a few years later wrote: "Imaginez tout ce qu'on peut faire de plus hideux et de plus cruel et vous serez encore au-dessous de la réalité, au moins en ce qui concerne nos voisins immédiats, les Bondjos" (Dias Briand 1982:87).

Although most if not all central Africans were considered more or less cannibalistic in the nineteenth century, the Bondjo had a special reputation, and their practices were described in the most degrading manner. For example: "La plupart des villages immolent chaque jour au moins un esclave, et sa chair palpitante est dévorée toute fumante" (Augouard 1889:83); "Leur passion pour la chair humaine est poussée à ce point qu'ils repêchent dans la rivière, pour les dévorer, des cadavres en pleine décomposition et déterrent des corps depuis longtemps ensevelis" (Huot 1902:302).

What puts these kinds of statements in relief is a contradictory one. But this is certainly an exception: People have exaggerated "le danger couru au milieu de ces sauvages, qui en somme me semblent plutôt de braves gens ayant de mauvaises habitudes;" they are afraid of whites and do not pose any real danger regardless of what is said around Bangui (Castellani [1898]:234, 254).

How the French reacted to the people around Bangui has to be considered, in the last analysis, in terms of how they perceived other Africans. Although in general the French, like most other participants in the colonization of central Africa, were racist, accepting their high place on the scale of human evolution, a notion that by this time was well established in colonialist ideology, they did make distinctions between various ethnic groups, depending in large part on how they, the French, were received. In this

were

light the Ngbaka of Bangui came out very badly indeed. While they were being denigrated in the strongest language, the Gbanziri, only a few days' journey upriver by canoe, were described in the most favorable of terms.²⁹ [Although they were mostly centered around the mouth of the Kouango River, two hundred kilometers away, they had fishing villages closer to Bangui, for example at the mouth of the Ombella River (Brunache 1894:65).] Mgr. Augouard, for example, said that this race was "beaucoup plus douce, plus accessible" (Augouard, 12.3.1893, CSE). Someone who played an important role in this area in the 1890s had this to say of them:

Les Banziris constituaient une des plus puissantes peuplades riveraines de l'Oubangui. De tous les noirs que l'on rencontrait sur la route du Congo au Nil, ils étaient incontestablement les plus sympathiques. Leur physionomie relativement agréable, leur caractère communicatif et enjoué, produisaient le plus heureux contraste lorsqu'on les comparait à ces affreux Bondjos, sombres, rébarbatifs, méfiants" (Bobichon 1932:2).

Another wrote, "La tribu Banziri est sans contredit la plus belle de la contrée, pour la beauté physique et la douceur de ses mœurs" (Nebout 1892:230).

The Ngbaka, behaving as they did, and the French, believing as they did, it was inevitable that the latter would have a difficult time at Bangui. In the next section we examine the nature of the French response in their predicament.³⁰ [The local people also found themselves in a predicament. Its nature is suggested in what follows for the period we are considering. A fuller account would include a discussion of the way the people of the Haut-Oubangui were called upon to provide provisions, canoes, labor, and so forth. Their behavior might be seen as itself a response to their immediate situation.]

The French response

Force was the French response to their situation at Bangui. It was expressed in the use of firearms and the taking of hostages.

Another response was flight: some of the administrators even considered establishing an alternative post further upriver.

Force must be recognized first as a means to achieving immediate aims, not just a response to theft and violence on the part of the local inhabitants. La politique indigène for this whole period was stated in a report written in 1901:

Tous mes efforts tendent à persuader aux chefs indigènes que nos intentions sont absolument pacifiques, que nous venons leur apporter le concours de notre civilisation et la force que nous en tirons, que nous voulons améliorer leurs conditions d'existence, faire naître le bien être chez eux et qu'en échange de tous ces avantages nous demandons seulement la soumission à nos ordres et une rétribution soit en prestations soit en produit du pays" ([Illegible], 31.1.1901, ANX 4(3)D8).³¹ [Given the difficulties of linguistic communication at this time, there being only a very limited African pidgin in use, and the abstractness of the administrator's message, we take this sentence with a grain of salt.]

Therefore every appearance of unfriendliness was treated as rebelliousness. It was expected of the people that they submit themselves to French authority. Within a short time after the founding of Bangui, 20 October 1889, to be precise, when the chief of a "grand village" opposite Zongo "ne voulait pas venir pour faire camarade (c'est l'expression consacrée)[,] M. Uzac, avec 10 hommes, débarqué un bon matin, tue 5 hommes, enlève 7 pirogues, des cabris, des poules et brûle tout de fond en comble" (Musy 1891:133). In 1901 the commander at Bangui, wanting to establish relations with the Bagba on the Ombella River, was going to "entamer ... une action soit pacifique soit militaire suivant les circonstances" ([Illegible], 31.1.1901, ANX 4(3)D8).

This same document raises the question of one of the desperate needs of the post: food to nourish both the whites, their soldiers,

and their workers. His object was to "ouvrir les portes de ce grenier qu'est l'intérieur entre l'Ombella et la M'Poko." There had not yet been established at Bangui, if another document is read correctly, a market where militiamen and concessionnaires could buy things. Eighteen precious gardes pavillons were placed at seven locations, presumably to extract provisions from the villagers (Ducq, ANX 4(3)D8).

Frequent are statements in the records about the need for food at Bangui. In 1895, for example, "Le poste est affamé" (Rémy, CSE). It was the Gbanziri, for most of this time apparently, "qui approvisionnent presque exclusivement le poste" (Masui 1894:108). By contrast, three of the four villages immediately downriver of Bangui were characterized as "douteux ou mauvais" with respect to providing "ressources" in 1890-1891, and Yakouli was only slightly better; and strangely enough, Yuka, the village that later administrators were to have to so much trouble with, was rated the best (Ponel, ANX 4(3)D13).³² [In the light of all that we know about provisioning the post we are not obliged, I believe, to take at face value the statement that it took sixty porters two days to destroy the banana and corn gardens of the Buzeru not far downriver from Bangui in a repressive action (Nebout 1892:225). We can safely assume, to begin with, that a lot of time was spent in pillaging the destroyed village and the widely scattered gardens. Kalck (1970a(2):346) wrote that Albert Dolisie in November 1887 found at the bend of the Ubangi River "l'abondance de vivres d'un bon marché inouï," citing de Chavannes. But this writer did not specify the location of the places where food was available. He only said, "Les vivres sont abondants partout et d'un bon marché inouï" (De Chavannes 1936:111). I do not think that "partout" can be taken in a literal sense in a work of this kind. Another bit of apparently contradictory information is Kalck's statement (1970a(2):503), based on his reading of the post's journal for October 1891, that, in his words, it "regorgeait de vivres." This most certainly was a temporary state of affairs, depending on what had just arrived from Brazzaville, what had been acquired recently from here and there, and so forth.]

We see then that it was only when soldiers were posted in a village and after raids that people furnished food or brought it to the post to sell (Nebout 1892:225-226; Jacquot,

ASOM B31-23).

A more forceful response was the taking of hostages. According to Kalck (1970a(2):387, no documentation) the three Europeans at Bangui in 1890 (Ponel, Fondère, and Daurel) were in such a state of fear that, to prevent attacks, they kept hostages at the post. Another reason for taking hostages was in seeking retribution for thefts committed by villagers. According to Crampel around 1890 these were usually women (Kalck 1970b:69). But they also included children (Jacquot, ASOM B31-23). When stolen rifles were not returned, hostages could be sure of execution (Jacquot, ASOM B31-26). This kind of behavior on the part of the French was not, however, specific to relations with the local people. It was common in those days to take the theft of rifles and ammunition even by one's soldiers or auxiliary workers very seriously. By one account the punishment was "une balle dans la tête" (Maistre 1895:66).

Repressive action was taken apparently in the case of murder or the refusal to settle a question of theft. The records do not justify every one. It is not clear, for example, why Comte deliberately set out in July 1897 to attack what he called the Bondjo of the M'Poko (Comte, 28.7.1897, ASOM B23-40), unless this was a kind of pre-emptive strike. All that he had written of them in January of that year was the following: "Voilà 2 nuits de suite que les Bondjos de Youka viennent visiter le poste pendant la nuit: il [the chief Youka] s'est vanté de nous tuer des factionnaires pour avoir des cartouches dont il a besoin pour pouvoir se servir des mousquetons qu'il a fait voler depuis plusieurs années" (Comte, 28.1.1897, ASOM B23-35). And in June he wrote that "nous sommes enserrés par les Bondjos qui nous guettent. La disposition du poste le rendant très difficile à défendre, il faut s'attendre à tout. ... Cette situation ne peut plus se prolonger ..." (Comte, 13.6.1897, ASOM B23-38). Comte was killed on this expedition.

Following this event Jacquot undertook an expedition against these people in which three "immense" villages were destroyed,

about twenty people killed, and five prisoners (male and female) taken (Jacquot, ASOM B32-22).³³ [It is curious that Bruel, who had heard about this event from Jacquot himself, wrote in two different letters that forty to fifty men were killed and forty prisoners taken (Bruel, ASOM B2-33, B2-34).]

In other actions 150 Bondjo were supposed to have been killed, possibly in 1898 (Dias-Briand 1982:83), and another 300 (or 200), apparently at Yuka again, in 1899 (Augouard, Brazzaville, 18.6.1899, CSE; Dias Briand 1982:103-104).

The fate of prisoners, like that of hostages, could be an awful one. Writing in April 1895 Fr. Émile Leclercq said that forty Bondjo prisoners were going to be shot at the post (De Banville 1985:61). When seven of Jacquot's women prisoners escaped from the post (having been confided to militiamen), only two were recaptured. They were immediately executed by rifle fire. Jacquot concludes his account with these words: "maintenant à l'exception de ces cinq femmes et de ces deux mômes je suis débarrassé de cette sale graisse" (Jacquot, ASOM B31-25). On the other hand, the seventeen boys and girls who were captured in his repressive action were sent to the mission at Brazzaville.

Force was also used in trying to make what I would call a 'clean zone' for Bangui: the inhabitants were to be expelled from the area. This was attempted as early as 1890, when Crampel wrote: "Tous les villages riverains, convaincus d'avoir pris part aux vols et attaques contre les Européens, sont définitivement chassés du voisinage ..." (quoted in Kalck 1970b:76). The action must not have been effective, for the following year the administrator is recommending that the Bouzerous should be chased from the Bangui area (Ponel, ANX 4(3)D11). We hear six years later of the same plan: "Dès que le premier détachement de tirailleurs et de miliciens va arriver à Bangui on va en profiter pour donner sérieusement la [chasse?] à tous les Bondjos pour dégager Bangui" (Bruel, ASOM B2-41). Another wrote of "un nettoyage complet des villages

[Bondjo] de l'intérieur" (cited in Mollion 1982(1):238). But even in 1901 the post's commander reported that the villages of Bimbo and Yacoli "ne sont réellement soumis que depuis quelques mois" (Illegible, 31.1.1901, ANX 4(3)D8).

Even while force was used to try to solve their problems with the natives French administrators considered downgrading Bangui. In November 1890 it was only the "conditions actuelles," according to Crampel that prevented a new post being established upriver (Kalck 1970a(2):393). The matter was taken up most seriously by V. Largeau in correspondence with his superior in Brazzaville. He wrote:

Au point de vue de l'extension de notre influence politique, chose à laquelle nous devons surtout viser, la situation de Bangui est déplorable. Assez loin du poste se trouvent quelques pauvres villages habités par de misérables Noirs de race inférieure dont il n'y a rien à attendre, si ce n'est l'incommensurable quantité de bananes qu'ils apportent journellement. Donc, pour asseoir notre influence, il faut chercher un autre point; ..." (Largeau, 17.1.1892, ANX 4(3)D2).

Bangui should not, however, be abandoned, he reasons. It was needed to oversee the passage of goods through the rapids, because of the presence of the State's post at Zonga [sic], and because it would not be advisable to be at the mercy of a commercial firm at Bangui. Its role, in conclusion, should be that of "un poste de ravitaillement" directed by a white agent, what he called "un petit poste" in a subsequent communication (Largeau, 24.3.1892, ANX 4(3)D2).³⁴ [In view of what was said above about the need for food, it should be pointed out that in arguing for locating the new post downriver of the mouth of the Kouango River he points out that it would be near "des peuples agricoles," who cultivate a variety of produce (Largeau, 18.7.1892, ANX 4(3)D2). The Kouango was about 200 kilometers from Bangui (20.1.1902, ANX 4(3)D8).

By 1901 French hegemony was better established. Although control did not extend

very far inland, administrators were writing encouraging reports. Thus, "La situation politique est satisfaisante et notre autorité s'affirme d'avantage de jour en jour" ([Illegible], 31.1.1901, ANX 4(3)D8).³⁵ [35]By contrast, three years later another wrote: "A peine sommes nous en rapport avec quelques villages situés à proximité du poste ou des rives du fleuve." And he goes on to say: "L'intérieur est pour nous l'inconnu, les peuplades qui s'y trouvent méconnaissent absolument notre autorité et ont le plus grand désir de continuer à l'ignorer" ([No name], ANX 4(3)D11). It is to be recognized, of course, that administrative reports were written with a purpose, which frequently was to argue for more of anything one could get: money, militiamen, and so forth. The report of January 1901 certainly gives this impression.] In this same year another wrote that "La Région de Bangui est certainement une des plus importantes du Congo, à tous les points de vue; ..." (De Pauwel, 9.10.1901, ANX 4(3)D8).

What had happened at Bangui was that it had been built up physically: it was a more secure place. But it was more secure also because there were more armed men about. The budget for 1901 listed the following: "2 Gardes principaux de 2^e classe, 1 Adjudant, 2 Sergents, 4 caporaux, 1 clairon, 12 miliciens de 1^{ère} classe, 35 miliciens de 2^e classe, and 20 miliciens auxiliaires" ([Illegible], 12.2.1901, ANX 4(3)D8). By this time, too, as we read from these reports, concessionary companies were working in the region, and rubber was being collected.

Indeed, by the end of 1904 Bangui had apparently grown in size, and the following report suggests the beginning of its future as an inter-ethnic 'city' in the modern sense:

La situation politique de cette région est des plus calmes et je n'ai à ce titre aucun fait intéressant à vous signaler si ce n'est une légère tendance de certains indigènes des rives de l'Oubangui à se grouper auprès de Bangui où la présence d'un certain nombre d'Européens leur assure quantités de petits profits ([No name], ANX 4(3)D12).

In other words, unlike the traditional villages of the area Bangui was a place

where Ubangians could come in some measure of safety for their own profit and pleasure.³⁶ [36]For example, a missionary at St. Paul noted the passage on the river of eight Gbanziri canoes loaded with goats, accompanying for protection a convoy with two Europeans, going to exchange the animals for slaves among the Bondjo (Sallaz, 21.5.1897, CSE). Even though this may not have been an entirely accurate report, it is safe to deduce that the Gbanziri were travelling for commercial reasons in this area.] Bangui's future was more certain than it had ever been. To a person travelling up the river after having seen some of the fine towns in the Congo Free State Bangui in 1904 may have appeared dilapidated and in desolate condition, but it did have a brick building, and there were sixteen to eighteen whites living there (Mountmorres 1906:164). Indeed, by 1905 there was talk of making a "ville" of Bangui, because it had become the capital Oubangui-Chari, which had been organized as an administrative colony. Its white population was about thirty (Bulletin de la Congrégation [C.S.Sp] 23:163 [1905]). A few years later it was about forty (Deschamps 1911:87). In 1907 the population of the "Agglomération urbaine de Bangui," including the people at the mission St. Paul was 800 (1907, ANX 4(3)D13).³⁷ [37]Under the heading "Evaluations rectificatives" for the "Région de Bangui" under the heading already cited are given these figures: Ndris, 1000; Bakkas, 1100; Babas, 1000; and 1100 for "Ngaos, Ngapous, Ouaddas, Bakkas-Mandjias de la rive droite de l'Ombella." It is not clear why these figures are so low if they apply to the whole region. However, one has to take into consideration the note made for this column: "Partout où il a été possible de se baser sur des recensements d'impôt indigène, on a triplé le chiffre des adultes mâles imposables pour obtenir celui de la population totale correspondante." This may suggest that the total of 5,000 for the Bangui region is that of those who were subject to taxes. It adjoins the figure of 30,000 already cited for the whole region.] And in 1913 the town had grown so that its black population was 3,000, with 300 militiamen, and 170 whites ([Calloc'h] 1929:61).³⁸ [38]My source in this instance may not be exact.]

Explanations

It took the French about ten years to establish their power over the people around Bangui. This was accomplished because of uninterrupted residence at the post,

reinforced from time to time by relatively large numbers of French personnel when expeditions were going through, but mostly because of the exercise of force. It is easier to explain the establishment of French hegemony, however, than it is to explain why the French, and even King Leopold's agents, had more trouble here than anywhere else in central Africa. This historical fact, amply demonstrated in what has preceded, has to be explained.³⁹ [39] If I seek to explain, I do not share the view of Veyne, who declares that "l'histoire n'explique pas: elle explicite" (1984:11).]

A recent attempt at an explanation claims that it was "des guerres tribales que contribueront pendant près de 15 ans à faire des chefs Bondjo de la région de Bangui les ennemis déclarés des Français qui avaient fait l'échange du sang avec les M'Baka" (Kalck 1970a(1):257). In other words, whereas the French dealt with the local Ngbaka, the site was actually "âprement disputé par des ethnies fort diverses" (1970a(2):257). This is pure speculation, the product of Kalck's attempt at a broad ethnohistory of the whole of the Central African Republic. It derives in part from his idea of the way different groups moved from one area to another over the centuries, but also on his idea of trade on the Ubangi River. One deduces from what he has written that the local people reacted violently to the control that the French and the Belgians had taken over traditional trade (Kalck 1970a(2):351, 539). His documentation, however, is inadequate, and we are still far from understanding trade on the Ubangi in the nineteenth century.⁴⁰ [40] A suggestion similar to Kalck's was proposed in 1901: "Ceux-ci [indigènes] ne me paraissent pas enthousiastes de l'établissement des Européens dans des terrains, qu'ils étaient accoutumés à considérer comme étant à eux" (De Pauwel, 24.6.1901, ANX 4(3)D8). If this statement, given its date, is to be taken as a suggestion of why the people around Bangui reacted to whites as they did, it will be necessary to demonstrate, first, that these people held an attitude to their territory that other central Africans did not hold. For the moment, there is no evidence that there was any more reason for the people at the bend of the Ubangi to oppose the whites for occupying the area any more than the people around Mobaye and Banzville further upriver. Second, it will have to be

demonstrated that there was something about the occupation of the area by the French and the Congo Free State that was different from what it was in other places. For this too there is at the present time no evidence.] Interruption in traditional trade, in any case, cannot be invoked, because elsewhere on the Ubangi and Congo rivers whites were doing the same thing without having the same difficulties.

It is attractive in seeking historical explanations to see events as issuing out of other events. Sometimes the role of an individual makes the difference in what happens in a certain situation. One of the worst explanations attributes actions to the what people inherently are. This is precisely the kind of explanation, as we saw, that whites in the nineteenth century indulged in: the Bondjo stole because they were nothing but thieves; they murdered because they were rapacious, bloodthirsty, and cannibalistic. Such racist thinking was proven wrong, as we see with a historical perspective, because in a short time these very same people were living more or less at peace with whites and with one another. Their natures had not been transformed; they simply had adapted to the new situation. They were undergoing culture change.

Culture is as determinant of behavior as human nature. It must have been cultural features that allowed — indeed, motivated — the Ngbaka around Bangui to prey on the French as they did. It must have been culture and social structure that made them so different from the Gbanziri about two hundred kilometers further upriver. The latter were not different racially, if we take the word race in any serious sense. The Gbanziri, as well as the Sango-Yakoma people even further upriver, were for the most part hospitable and cooperative people in dealing with the French. The Ngbaka were not.

I think that the Ngbaka behaved toward the French, and presumably the Belgians across the river, in very much the same way they behaved towards other ethnic groups in this area. They may even have been on bad

terms with each other.¹¹ [¹¹To support the argument that the riparian population feared each other one can cite descriptions of villages protected with strong palisades (Nebout 1892:228). It is reasonable to suppose that the active trade in slaves by the Bobangi, who had large centers on the lower Ubangi River, may have motivated others downriver of these people to raid them for captives. A suggestion of the size of this population, for example at places called Mon-Zembo and Mon-Tumbi by Vangele, is deduced from the fact that every morning one could see 200 to 300 canoes carrying to their day's labor women and children "with a few warriors to protect them" (Vangele 1889:327). Of course, since many of these could have been slaves, we can also assume that these Ubangians raided for their own use as well as for trade. That these villages were also bothered by people toward the interior at no great distance is demonstrated by complaints made by the inhabitants of Yakuli and Botambi about the Zalanga (Kalck 1970b:67). The Zalanga are noted as an ethnic group on Ponel's map of 1890-1891 (ANX 4(3)01).] On the other hand, it cannot be ignored that the people of Yakuli sold fish and pots to others living further upriver (Musy 1890:293) and that there was an iron market among the Buzeru at Bala, a little upriver of the Bangui-Zongo rapids on the left bank (Alis 1891:106; Brunache 1894:63). However, trade between people does not mean that they are always on good terms. Stealing is not difficult to explain if we assume that theft and something like banditry were practiced customarily by young and adult men.¹² [¹²In making this statement I am taking a relativistic, not racist, point of view. I am hypothesizing that for reasons that have not been determined the people at the bend of the Ubangi may have been more prone to preying on others by theft than other populations. I am fully aware of the fact that in Africa social ethics were to be found that sought the avoidance of inter-village and inter-ethnic strife and that proscribed theft for whatever reason. For example, interviewing Bamwe elders at Limpoko, Zaire, in 1988, I learned that the male and female age groups called eyando (plural, biyando) had as their purpose not only mutual help but also the control of social behavior. Members of an eyando (and everyone became a member at a certain age) were punished by a fine if they committed a theft. Theft was defined, it would appear, as an act committed against anyone, not just against co-members of an eyando. We await evidence that Ubangians had a similar ethic.

What might have made this kind of practice common, one might speculate, was the absence of strong leadership, the kind of leadership that the elders of lineages would have exercised to avoid warfare and

bloodshed. In spite of the fact that the French wrote about the chief of this and that village, there is no evidence that elders had the kind of authority that this term implies. In fact, except for the Nzakara to the far east, the people of this vast area, Gbaya- and Banda-speaking alike, have been traditionally acephalous in social structure (De Dampierre 1967). Therefore independently motivated behavior seems to have been the case. This is what I see in the fact that there were attempts at theft even after repressive action had been taken against certain villages. For example: "la répression exercée contre les Bondjos [in this case against the village of Yukal], ne les a pas désarmés; ils continuent leurs visites de nuit comme par le passé" (Jacquot, 25.7.1897, ASOM B31-22).¹³ [¹³Of course, it is possible in such cases that people from different villages were involved. If this were so, it would be evidence that the local inhabitants were acting independently of each other and that they were not intimidated by what the whites were doing to others. In Bangui's case, therefore, Dybowski was wrong when he asserted that "il est facile de régner dans un pays qui est ainsi tout naturellement divisé et dans lequel chaque village n'a qu'une action isolée" (1893:164). But he never had to administer a post, being only the leader of an expedition.]

The post at Bangui would have been a tempting place for theft. It was obvious that there were a lot of goods in the grass shacks. (We have remarked on the absence of attacks on canoes.) Moreover, when contact was made with the personnel of the post, the Ngbaka would only have seen a few at a time. In any case, for much of this time the armed personnel at Bangui was very limited. For the French it was logistically unwise to undertake military expeditions as was proven true with Musy and Comte. Toward the end of 1890, for example, the total strength of Bangui was the following: "11 miliciens sénégalais non instruits, 3 réengagés, 19 travailleurs bassa, 9 non valeurs" (Kalck 1970a(2):388, citing a letter by Ponel). At this time Crampel wrote: "La misère de ce pauvre petit poste de Bangui est absolue. Si les indigènes avaient un peu de poil, depuis longtemps tout serait enlevait" (cited in Kalck 1970a(2):390). In March of the

following year there were nineteen militiamen: fourteen Sénégalais and five Pahouin (that is, Fang) (Ponel, 30.3.1891, ANX 4(3)D1). In February 1894 there were only ten men plus one sergeant (Decazes, ANSOM XVI.13). So precious were troops that a proposal was made by E. Decazes to increase the force to only twenty men at Bangui in 1895 (Comte, July 1895, ANSOM GC XVI.13). Twenty-one is what Comte had in 1896 (Comte, 16.11.1896, ANSOM B23-31).

In these circumstances a French administrator could very well write these words to his superior in Brazzaville: "Nous sommes dans des conditions d'infériorité réelles vis à vis de nos voisins de l'Etat Indépendant. Leurs envois considérables d'hommes, de marchandises leur donne un prestige aux yeux des indigènes que nous ne possédons pas (Ponel, 4.2.1891, ANX 2D5). And a missionary could write: "Tous les noirs du pays se moquent des Français tandis qu'ils vantent la force et la puissance de l'Etat Indépendant" (Moreau, 4.3.1894, CSE). That the French personnel would have made such comparisons is easy to understand. If the natives on the French side did likewise, it would not be information, I think, that the French could get.

Up to this point we have given the impression that bad relations between the local inhabitants and the colonizers was due entirely to the former. This was certainly not the case. If the Ubangians were reacting in their way to the intruders, the latter were reacting in their own way and for their own reasons. Whites and foreign blacks alike came to Bangui with their cultural baggage as well as their expectations and fears.

Fear must have been a real factor for all those who were trying to survive on the bank of the Ubangi River. In its first year "Ille poste n'était alors composé que d'une habitation en paille, de deux hangars, élevés au bord de la rivière, sur un coin à peine défriché de la forêt, qui, à cinquante mètres entourait comme une muraille ce poste qui semblait une prison" (Nebout 1892:222). All that has been written above about Bangui

has to be understood from this perspective. The struggling camp, for that is all it was, surrounded by nearly impenetrable equatorial rain forest, must have been a lugubrious place for all. They had a little view over the river, but behind them they could imagine a dangerous warrior behind any tree. Docteur Briand wrote that the Bondjo "sont insaisissables et absolument invisibles dans la brousse" (Dias Briand 1982:83).

If the French had made a determined and prolonged effort at establishing good relations with the people and becoming well acquainted with them, they most certainly would not have had the trouble they had, and they would have been more sanguine about their place at Bangui. Their failure to do so must be considered a fault. There was a time in 1895 when the administrator made no effort to resolve a palaver with the Bondjo but actually did not want to see one at his door (Rémy, 17.6.1895, CSE). Crampel recognized the problem when he wrote to the Sous-secrétaire d'Etat aux Colonies on 3 October 1890: "A vrai dire, la politique suivie par les Européens ici ne peut qu'amener des résultats plus fâcheux encore. Tous les agents, français aussi bien que belges, ne se préoccupent nullement d'entrer en relations avec les indigènes" (cited in Kalck 1970a(2):388-389). "La peur," he wrote in the same letter, "fait voir des ennemis partout et par peur on confond tout dans la même haine" (Kalck 1970b:69).¹¹ [**Kalck's quotation of this material in these two works differs syntactically.] This sentiment is expressed by a member of his expedition: "l'européen, rebuté par leur laideur physique [that of the Buzerul], leur caractère farouche, était resté trop longtemps sans essayer de les attirer" (Nebout 1892:230). It was only under Crampel, apparently, that peaceful strolls were made without arms; the village men responded by appearing without their usual arms (Nebout 1892:226). We saw above that Musy, the young chef de poste, also tried to attract some of the people, but we do not know what steps he took.

As late as 1901 an administrator could

write that the influence of the administration was "à peu près nulle à quelque kilomètres dans l'intérieur pour la bonne raison, que jamais l'on y est allé ou tout au moins séjourné assez pour que nous puissions être connus" (De Pauwel, 24.6.1901, ANX 4(3)D8).

The need for culturally sensitive agents seems to have been recognized by Ponel who, in asking for more of them, said, "mais que les agents qui viendront ici se pénétrèrent d'idées de patience, de quasi familiarité avec les malheureux sauvages que nous devons assimiler" (Ponel, 12.6.1891, ANX 4(3)D1).

The officials at Bangui might have taken a lesson from the missionaries at St. Paul who sought to "renouer des relations avec les Bondjos" so as have them bring bananas (Rémy, 17.6.1895, CSE). They were also successful in having Ndri, a Banda group, move from the interior to the mission.⁴⁵ [Another explanation for this move is that of Mgr. Augouard, who said that it was to flee the Bondjo that these Ndri, about 1,200 in number, came "s'installer sous la protection de la Mission" (Annales Apostoliques, No. 49, Septembre 1897, p. 176, cited by De Banville 1985:80). In 1898 their village numbered 200 houses (Bulletin de la Congrégation 1898:424).] With their large gardens they were able to provide the mission with produce from time to time (De Pauwel, 16.4.1901, ANX 4(3)D8). The missionaries may have been the first to lead people to relocate near the post or along the river. Their frequent contact with the people seems to have led to fairly good relations. They were so good in one case that when Fr. Rémy was ill with liver infection, Ouroukoumanzi, the chief of the Ndri village, came to see him. He touched his legs to see if he was dead, stood at the side of the bed for several minutes, and then began to cry (Rémy, 17.6.1895, CSE). Even with Yuka, a Bondjo chief on the Mpoko River, relations were good, so good that he had confided one of his sons to the missionaries and Fr. Leclercq planned to take a trip amongst his people (Leclercq, 4.1.1897, CSE). Yet he is the one who in that very month, as we saw, was supposed to have boasted that he was going to kill the whites at the post.

Of course, communication was a problem. No language known to the black personnel with the French would have done them any good. Pidgin Sango was just emerging along the river, but the people in Bangui would not have known it in any case (Samarin 1982, 1984). The soldiers and workers would have had to acquire some knowledge of Ngbaka. When Crampel wrote the letter just cited neither the French nor the State post across the river had yet formed a single interpreter. In 1891 Ponel complained, presumably because of terms of service coming to an end: "Nous n'avons plus d'interprète, à part le caporal Sénégalais" (Ponel, 4.2.1891, ANX 2D5).

One factor for which the French were not personally responsible was their number. The post frequently had only two whites, and at least one of them may have been ill. At times there was only one (Ponel, 4.2.1891, ANX 2D5). The post could not be left unattended while the French agent made exploratory trips or friendly visits.

If the French can be faulted for failure to establish good relations with the people, their black personnel were equally responsible for some of the bad relations. In the first place, they must have been the source of most of what the whites believed about the people. They were the ones who reported to the whites that someone had been skulking about at night. From who else would the administrator learn, for example, that it was people from Yuka's village who had come at night and that Yuka himself was trying to get shells for the guns he had stolen? (Comte, 28.1.1897, ASOM B23-35). I believe that the black personnel fed whites a great deal of misinformation. It is not impossible that some of this was actually disinformation: blacks reporting thefts for which they alone were responsible. This is what one agent reported at another site on the river (Le Maréchal, 16.2.1896, ASOM B31-8).

These blacks misinformed the whites partly because they themselves were afraid. They believed as much as the whites did that the local people were nothing but savages. It

has been well demonstrated that Africans were as racist as whites, only for different reasons. The Sénégalais, for example, considered all these people naked savages (Decorse 1906:20). And it was easy for uncritical personnel to accept what some Ubangians said about others. For example, the people of Yakoli and Bagassi were "méchantes gens," "comme disent les indigènes de la région (Breton, 7.7.1890, ANSOM GC IV.14).

Those who were working for the French, whether they were foreign blacks or Ubangians from other parts, took advantage of their relationship with the whites to steal and loot and in other ways oppress the local people. Liotard himself witnessed his Gbanziri and Sango canoemen, for example, helping themselves to Bondjo fish, chickens, and goats near Bangui after the latter had fled (Liotard, 2.2.1892, ANSOM-Mi 213). Some of these acts were purely opportunistic, to be sure, but there were times when the personnel at Bangui was hard up for food (Gref, 14.8.1898, ANX 4(3)D7). In some cases the local people took it upon themselves, not yet understanding that the whites would mediate on their behalf, to get retribution. Thus, in 1897 the people of Yakoli killed six militiamen and thirteen women and workers, because a Sénégalais had taken one of their women by force (Liotard, 25.6.1897, ANSOM GC IV.14).

It would appear that the African personnel at the station pressured the whites to repressive measures. For example, in July 1897 Jacquot was worried about what would happen if some of his militiamen left when their term of service was over; he even considered going to the mission: "il n'y a que la mission qui puisse offrir un refuge suffisamment sûr" (Jacquot, 25.7.1897, ASOM B31-22). But a month later, after a repression had been made against a village, there was "un important regain de confiance de la part de tout le monde, aussi bien nous que miliciens et indigènes," and he had had seventeen requests for re-enlistment (Jacquot, 22.8.1897, ASOM B31-23).

Conclusion

This paper has documented the difficulties that the French had during their first decade at Bangui, established as their furthest outpost on the Ubangi River in 1889. Although the administrators were plagued by insufficient funds in establishing themselves on the right bank of the river, at Bangui itself the problem was one of race relations. The local inhabitants were at the least a nuisance; at worst, they kept the post at constant alert and made the whites believe that their existence was a very precarious one. The explanation for bad relations finds all participants at fault: the local people for persisting in their theft, the African personnel of the whites for their misinformation and for oppressing the people, and the French for being on the one hand racist in their attitudes to the local Ubangians and on the other hand slow at making an effort to establish good relations with them.

This paper also suggests the consequences for the local people of occupation of their territory by the whites.

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